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FM AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0290  
INFO RUEHXS/ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS  
RUEHBK/AMEMBASSY BANGKOK PRIORITY 0562  
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 CHIANG MAI 000169

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [ECPS](#) [KPAO](#) [TH](#)

SUBJECT: COMMUNITY RADIO STATIONS RE-OPEN TO SELF-CENSORSHIP  
GUIDELINES

REF: A) CHIANG MAI 159, B) BANGKOK 5848, C) BANGKOK 5937

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11. Summary. Community radio stations have returned to the airwaves nearly two weeks after Third Army leaders ordered local stations to close. The temporary closure was aimed at stifling potential counter-coup organizers in former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's northern power base. Station owners eventually pushed back against the strict closure rules, but exchanged permission to re-open this week for strict self-censorship guidelines. End Summary.

The CDR Killed the (Community) Radio Star  
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12. The morning after the Sept. 19 coup, Third Army commander Lt. Gen. Saprang Kalayanamitr moved quickly to control the northern region, requiring officials and media representatives to "report themselves" to military offices (ref A). Army officials also ordered nearly 600 community radio stations in northern Thailand off the air, claiming the move was necessary to maintain social order. In contrast, print media and television stations in the north did not attract the attention received by their counterparts in Bangkok (ref B, C).

13. The closure order reportedly stemmed from Sept. 20 broadcasts by two community stations airing call-in segments that voiced anti-coup sentiments - the low wattage stations had the morning free to discuss the previous night's events while bigger broadcasters were disrupted from the outset. Fearing that community radio could foment anti-coup meetings and demonstrations, 3rd Army officials ordered them off the air. For the next 10 days, Chiang Mai radios picked up little more than static across all frequencies except for a few local larger stations, such as Chiang Mai University's FM 100, and those broadcasting news and entertainment feeds originating in Bangkok.

14. In the largely unregulated world of Thai community radio, many of these small stations were considered Thai Rak Thai party (TRT) affiliates, with some allegedly instigating opposition to local rallies by anti-Thaksin groups over the past year. Based on this legacy, army officials feared these local radio stations could be used by TRT operatives to promulgate anti-coup sentiments.

15. With many of these community stations dependant on advertising revenue for their operations and now facing significant business losses, station owners and managers complained to the 3rd Army over the shutdown. While some were supportive of the coup (one station owner told PolOff he was happy to suspend his operations), economic concerns led many owners to push 3rd Army officials and provincial public

relations officers to allow them to re-open. Following a Sept. 30 meeting, army officials agreed to lift the closure order in exchange for promises from station owners and employees to avoid political discussions that reflect negatively on the coup's Council for Democratic Reform.

¶6. Under the Sept. 30 agreement, stations will be allowed back on the air after owners submit their biographical details and addresses to the military. Owners are also required to monitor their stations' content and ban employees from discussing political issues on the air, including during listener call-in segments. Responsibility for monitoring the broadcasts has been turned over to Provincial Public Relations Department offices. As of Oct. 3, only a few dozen stations remained off the air, but a 3rd Army representative attributed their continued closure to histories of broadcasting on non-standardized frequencies rather than to politics.

¶7. Whether the military's ban on political discussions covers all discourse or is a targeted measure to counter TRT influence remains unclear. Based on conversations with station owners, many are interpreting the guidelines on their own. One well-known Thaksin opponent said he looked forward to "educating the audience" about Thaksin's alleged corruption. On the other hand, a pro-Thaksin station operator said he would leave political discussions behind and now focus only on entertainment programs.

All We Heard Was Radio Ga Ga

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¶8. Drafters of the 1997 constitution that opened the airwaves to public use envisioned villages, temples, schools, and other institutions taking advantage of the opportunity to build communities and social networks via radio. With support from district-level funding, local radio developed into a diverse patchwork of stations. Earlier this year, Embassy Bangkok's public affairs section recognized the democracy-building potential of these small operators and awarded small grants to

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NGOs working with community radio. Businesspeople, local political bosses, and other "persons of influence" also saw opportunities and began operating their own stations. By 2006, more than 150 community stations were broadcasting from Chiang Mai province, and another 70 from Chiang Rai.

¶9. Weaknesses and contradictions in the government's regulation of these new stations led to significant confusion across the airwaves with some station owners taking advantage of the lack of oversight. Many stations failed to register or pay for licenses, while others broadcast at higher wattages or put up higher antennas than allowed. The result was often a jumble of stations competing for limited bandwidth - a drive across town in Chiang Mai could find three or more stations fighting through the static on one frequency. This proliferation of community radio stations over the past few years magnified the perception of the post-coup clampdown on radio broadcasts in the north as the closure brought a temporary silence to what had been an unruly, overlapping melange of voices and music on the northern radio dial.

¶10. The unregulated nature of community radio likely contributed to station owners' willingness to close down on the military's orders. With fewer stations on the air, the ones that remained were more likely to get noticed and possibly hit up on violating any number of regulations rather than on more overt censorship grounds. Even some larger and medium-sized stations, such as Chiang Mai's all-English language station TITS 106.5, are known to skirt broadcast rules and took themselves off the air or reduced their programming hours in an effort to avoid attention during this time of increased scrutiny.

¶11. COMMENT: The 3rd Army's move to suppress pro-Thaksin sentiment over the community radio airwaves seems to have achieved its goal, as pro-TRT station operators accept that

their opinions should, for now, be kept to themselves. Economic pressures on those stations most reliant on advertising revenue, more than freedom of speech concerns, eventually mobilized owners to ask that the ban be lifted. The military's guidelines for self-censorship, while a sign of reduced independence of the media in the north, have not been a cause of much protest. Based on initial conversations, many station owners believe the guidelines are not intended to limit all political discussions, but only those in support of the former government. Many Thaksin foes see this temporary shut-down as the beginning of a renewed effort to pursue the now-defunct 1997 constitution's promise of greater community involvement in radio by weakening TRT influence over the media. End Comment.

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